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Academic and social goals in adolescence: developments and directions.

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Dr Caroline Mansfield
School of Education
Murdoch University
Western Australia

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Abstract

Over the past fifteen years there has been an increased research interest in motivation in learning contexts. Research in the field has been lead by those working with motivational goal theory, which emphasises the reasons students engage in achievement-related behaviour and takes into account both environmental and individual influences on student motivation. Much research has focused on academic achievement goals (such as mastery, performance, avoidance), however, social goals (such as relationships, responsibility and status) have also been shown to influence students' motivation and engagement in learning contexts. Although quantitative methods, such as surveys, have played a significant role in the development of this body of research, more recently the use of qualitative and inductive methods have illustrated the necessity of moving beyond surveys to capture the complexities of goals in real learning contexts. This paper critically reviews the literature on academic and social goals in adolescence highlighting both major developments in the field and questions that remain unanswered. Directions for future research are proposed.

Introduction

The emergence of goal orientation theory as one of the prominent theories in motivation research has lead to an abundance of studies investigating the types of goals pursued by individuals in learning contexts. Goal theory focuses less on *what* objectives individuals are trying to achieve in learning contexts, but more on *why* and *how* these objectives are being achieved (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007). Thus the overarching emphasis is on the cognitive “purposes students perceive for engaging in achievement-related behaviour and the meanings they ascribe to that behaviour” (Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, & Midgley, 2001, p. 35). Goal orientations have been shown to account for the difference in student motivational behaviour as the way students respond to tasks may differ according to the types of personal goals they pursue and the goals emphasised in the context in which they operate.

The central purpose of this review is to provide a brief overview of the development and scope of research concerning academic and social goals in learning contexts. In doing so, key conceptual issues and current debates will be explored. Areas for further research are highlighted and future directions for the development of goal theory considered.

Goal theory

Goal theorists have suggested that the motivation students have towards engaging in activities is directed by a complex set of goals (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988; Urdan, Kneisel, & Mason, 1999) including both academic and social goals. It has long been established that students pursue multiple goals in classroom situations (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988; Meece & Holt, 1993) and the role of multiple goals has been a feature of some research (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2001; Pintrich, 2000; Smith & Sinclair, 2005; Wentzel, 1992). Some researchers have suggested links between patterns of academic and social goal pursuit and their impact

on student achievement has been documented (L. H. Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Wentzel, 1991a). Even so, much of the focus in goal orientation research has been concerned with single goals and in particular, academic achievement goals (ie the academic reasons they want to achieve at school). It is, however, becoming widely acknowledged that the social reasons (goals) students have for wanting to achieve at school may be equally relevant (Dowson & McInerney, 2003). The following section provides an overview of the research regarding academic and social goals.

Academic achievement goals

Researchers using achievement goal theory initially described student achievement behaviour as oriented toward the achievement of goals to either improve competence or understanding (mastery goals) or to demonstrate high performance relative to others (ego or more recently performance goals) (Ames, 1992b). In recent years these goals have been conceptualised in both approach and avoidance forms (A. J. Elliot & McGregor, 2001). As competence lies at the centre of the achievement goal construct, how competence is both defined and valenced is a critical issue. Within achievement motivation, competence is valenced as either approaching success or avoiding failure and therefore some researchers argue that investigating mastery and performance goals in both their approach and avoid forms is fundamental to understanding achievement motivation. Empirical research has supported the 2 X 2 achievement goal framework (A. J. Elliot, 1999).

The goals of mastery and performance have received much research attention and are associated with approaches to learning, affect, cognitive strategies and broader views about the purposes of school (Ames, 1992b; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1992). Research has overwhelmingly supported the notion that mastery goals have an adaptive influence on cognition, affect and behaviour, whereas there is conflicting evidence about the influence of performance goals. Mastery and performance goals have been in the spotlight over the last two decades, however, early research also considered other goals such as extrinsic goals and work avoidance goals. This section begins by discussing research regarding mastery and performance goals and then gives an overview of how other goals have been addressed.

Mastery goals

Students who exhibit mastery goals aim to independently master and understand their work, have high cognitive engagement in learning activities (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988) and are concerned about developing competence in academic activities. These students view self-improvement and skill mastery as a reward and receive a sense of accomplishment from the inherent qualities of the task. Mastery oriented students are concerned with striving to master tasks, improving and developing intellectually and are interested in problem solving and challenge (E. M. Anderman, Maehr, & Midgley, 1999).

A mastery goal orientation has a positive influence on students' cognition, affect and behaviour (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Mastery goals have a positive impact on students' metacognitive knowledge, strategy usage, and academic effort (Ames, 1992a) and have been positively associated with deep processing, persistence and effort (A. J. Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999). In terms of affective outcomes, mastery goals seem to lead students to feel proud and satisfied when they are successful and guilty when they are not successful (Ames, 1992b). These affective outcomes are usually generated by attributions that stress the controllability of

behaviour (such as effort). Mastery orientation is associated with the view that school should prepare one for socially useful work and to understand the world (Nicholls, 1992). Students who exhibit task mastery orientation believe that success in school is the result of working cooperatively, working hard, being interested in the work and attempting to understand rather than memorise information (Nicholls, 1989). They believe that success is dependent on interest and effort, along with attempting to understand and help each other. In sum, researchers agree that mastery goals are consistently associated with positive learning behaviours and outcomes.

Mastery goals have been more recently partitioned into approach and avoid forms (A. J. Elliot & McGregor, 2001) and within this framework mastery approach goals refer to a focus on increasing levels of competence by acquiring knowledge or skills (as described above), and mastery avoidance (although sharing an emphasis on mastery) refers to engagement with emphasis on avoiding mistakes, failures or diminution of existing skills. Mastery-avoidance goals have been associated with text anxiety (A. J. Elliot & McGregor, 2001) and negatively related to both intrinsic motivation (Cury, Elliot, Da Fonseca, & Moller, 2006) and help seeking (Karabenick, 2003). They are mostly unrelated to grades or cognitive strategies (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007). Given the relatively recent approach / avoid distinction with mastery goals, research regarding the impact of mastery avoidance goals on individuals' cognition, affect and behaviour is still emerging.

Performance goals

Performance oriented students are concerned about demonstrating competence and are concerned with extrinsic variables such as gaining recognition and pleasing others. Students pursuing performance goals aim to demonstrate high ability in relation to others, impress those in authority (Meece, 1991) and receive external reinforcement regardless of the learning involved (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988). Performance goals have also been associated with the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Nicholls, Patashnick, & Nolen, 1985) and the view that school should help enhance one's wealth and socioeconomic status (Nicholls, 1992). Students who are performance oriented believe that being successful is the result of being intelligent, performing at a higher level than their peers, having teachers who expect them to do well, knowing how to impress others and showing a liking for the teacher (Nicholls, 1989).

Initial studies focusing on performance goals yielded inconsistent findings about whether such goals were associated with adaptive or maladaptive patterns of cognition, affect and behaviour (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007). In order to explain these inconsistencies researchers such as Elliot (1997) began to characterise performance goals in approach and avoid forms (A. J. Elliot, 1997; Middleton & Midgley, 1997). Students pursuing performance approach goals are concerned with demonstrating high performance relative to others and obtaining favourable judgements regarding their ability. Conversely, students pursuing performance avoidance goals are concerned about not demonstrating low performance relative to others and avoiding negative judgements about their ability.

Performance approach goals

There has been significant debate about the impact of performance approach goals on students' motivation and achievement. Performance approach goals have been associated with adaptive outcomes, for instance, affect, attitudes and valuing of academic work (Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan,

1996) and effort (A. J. Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999). In terms of positive consequences, performance approach has been linked to high levels of aspiration, absorption during task engagement, challenge related effect while studying, high performance outcomes and intrinsic motivation. Performance approach goals have also been linked to persistence and positive exam performance (A. J. Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999). However, performance approach goals have also been associated with use of superficial learning strategies (A. J. Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999) such as memorisation and rote rehearsal and unrelated to use of metacognitive strategies (A. J. Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Middleton & Midgley, 1997). Performance approach goals are also associated with avoidance of both help seeking (Middleton & Midgley, 1997; A. Ryan & Pintrich, 1997) and challenging tasks. Performance approach goals have therefore been associated with numerous positive and few negative processes and outcomes (A. J. Elliot, 1999).

Some authors argue that even though performance approach goals have been associated with adaptive outcomes, it may be because they are working in complementary ways with mastery goals (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001). Other authors have found that performance approach goals are adaptive for students with high perceived competence but not so for those with low perceived competence (E. S. Elliot & Dweck, 1988). As such there is still debate about how adaptive performance approach goals are (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001; Roeser, 2004) and further research is needed to establish under what conditions performance approach goals may have positive or negative motivational benefits.

Performance avoidance goals

Conversely, researchers are in unanimous agreement about the maladaptive outcomes associated with performance avoidance goals. Elliot (1999) reports that performance avoidance goals are linked to negative processes and outcomes. These include low absorption during task engagement, low self-determination during study, disorganised studying, procrastination, reluctance to seek help, shallow processing, poor retention of information, desire to escape evaluation, anxiety during evaluation, poor performance and reduced intrinsic motivation, along with surface processing and disorganization (A. J. Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999). Midgley and Urdan (2001) report that students pursuing performance avoidance goals are more likely to use self-handicapping strategies such as reduction of effort, procrastination and fooling around.

The current debate regarding the degree to which performance approach goals may be adaptive has been extended by authors such as Brophy (2005) who suggest that goal theorists should phase out the term 'performance goals' altogether and categorize goals differently. Brophy (2005) argues that students rarely spontaneously articulate that performance goals including peer comparison and competition are relevant to their achievement and therefore performance goals are a "low incidence phenomenon" (p. 171). Using the research of Grant and Dweck (2003), Brophy suggests that performance goals could be replaced by ability goals (validating ability, confirming intelligence, demonstrating intellectual ability), normative goals (social comparisons, doing better than others, being smarter than others) and outcome goals (obtaining positive outcomes, earning good grades, doing well). Brophy's comments support those who argue that the mastery and performance focus of academic achievement goals does not accurately reflect the goals students pursue in real learning environments.

Some authors argue that the partitioning of goals into mastery approach and avoidance, and performance approach and avoidance, constrain and limit opportunities for researchers to investigate the multidimensional nature of goals (including academic and social goals) and the relationship between such goals (McInerney & Ali, 2006). These contentions echo the suggestions of others that goal theory needs revision (Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002). Certainly there is emerging concern about goal theory's almost exclusive reliance on mastery and performance goals (and approach / avoidance distinctions) and whether these accurately reflect the range of reasons students have for wanting to achieve in authentic learning contexts.

Other academic goals

Initial research concerning goals suggested that students pursued other goals, apart from mastery and performance, such as extrinsic goals and work avoidance goals. In the proliferation of research regarding mastery and performance goals these other goals received less attention until recently when researchers have suggested that focusing only on mastery and performance goals fails to explain much of students motivational behaviour.

Extrinsic goals involve a desire to obtain rewards for academic effort or to avoid undesirable consequences such as punishment for poor behaviour or achievement (Kaplan & Maehr, 2002; Patrick, Ryan, & Pintrich, 1999; Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, & Gheen, 2002). Some authors have included extrinsic goals in their conceptualisation of performance goals, however, Elliot (1999) argues strongly that extrinsic goals do not represent achievement goals, but rather goals that are adopted in achievement settings, as they do not focus on competence but rewards or punishments. Therefore, extrinsic goals may lead to the adoption of achievement goals, but do not represent achievement goals themselves. Extrinsic goals have been associated with avoidance behaviours such as self-handicapping (Urdan & Midgley, 2001), cheating (E. M. Anderman & Midgley, 2004), and avoidance of help-seeking (A. Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). Gender differences have also been identified as extrinsic goals have been found to have more negative effects on males' efficacy perceptions, strategy use and performance over time (Patrick, Ryan, & Pintrich, 1999). While some studies show that extrinsic goals are not adaptive to learning, Freeman, Gutman & Midgely (2002) report that African American students pursue higher personal extrinsic goals than white students and that these appear to have a more positive effect on academic efficacy, self-regulated learning and use of handicapping. They argue

“there may be positive and negative aspects of extrinsic goals and further research is warranted to unpack the different types of extrinsic goals and their influence on student outcomes ... it may be that extrinsic-avoid goals are detrimental, whereas extrinsic approach goals are beneficial” (Freeman, Gutman, & Midgley, 2002, p. 199).

As such, the impact of extrinsic goals, and the factors that may influence pursuit of such goals warrants further research attention.

Early research also considered the role of work avoidant goals in students' classroom motivation (Ainley, 1993; Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988; Nicholls, 1989; Nicholls, Patashnick, & Nolen, 1985). Work avoidance goals were described as the goal of getting the work done with a minimum amount of effort or “conning the system” (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007, p. 146). Students pursuing work avoidance goals

deliberately avoid engaging in academic tasks or attempt to minimise effort in completing tasks (Dowson & McInerney, 2003; Dowson & McInerney, 2001; Dowson, McInerney, & Nelson, 2006). Although students pursuing work avoidance goals may behave similarly to those pursuing performance avoidance goals, these goals are from “different cognitive-affective frameworks” (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007, p. 146) as the goal of avoiding work is not necessarily due to a desire to disguise lack of ability. As research regarding achievement goals developed, and mastery and performance goals became increasing in the spotlight, work avoidance goals received less attention and in most instances disappeared from the discussion altogether. More recently, however, researchers (Dowson & McInerney, 2003; Dowson & McInerney, 2001; Dowson, McInerney, & Nelson, 2006) have begun to reconsider the influence of work avoidance goals in student motivation in classrooms. Although work avoidance is distinct from performance and mastery, these goals may combine to influence both engagement and achievement (Ainley, 1993; Dowson & McInerney, 2001). Indeed, they merit continued investigation.

Multiple academic goals

Researchers have argued that students pursue multiple goals in learning contexts and that multiple goals are more powerful than individual goals (Pintrich, 2000). Pursuit of both mastery and performance approach goals have been associated with self-regulated learning strategies, academic self-efficacy and low levels of anxiety depression, and self-handicapping strategies and the pursuit of both mastery and performance goals have been shown to have more positive benefits than pursuit of mastery or performance approach alone (Pintrich, 2000; Smith & Sinclair, 2005). Even though the issue of multiple goals was evident in early writings about goal orientation theory (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988; Meece & Holt, 1993) limited research, mostly of a quantitative nature has addressed this issue. Given that mastery and performance goals have been shown to be adaptive, further research is necessary to reveal how these goals operate simultaneously to produce positive outcomes.

Social goals

There has been a growing recognition amongst researchers and theorists of the impact of social influences on student learning and motivation (McCaslin & Good, 1996). Early research in the field of social motivation has shown the significant impact social motivation has on students’ classroom behaviour and academic achievement (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996). Some researchers have also demonstrated that the social organization of classrooms and schools and student relationships with peers and teachers influence motivation in a dramatic way (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996; Maehr & Midgley, 1996).

Within a goal orientation framework, students’ social goals in schools are concerned with the social/interpersonal reasons for trying to achieve (or not to achieve) in academic situations (Urdu & Maehr, 1995). Initially goals were conceptualised from a “goal content” perspective involving a focus on what goals students pursue (Wentzel, 1999b). Early research focused on goals such as social approval, compliance, solidarity and concern (Urdu & Maehr, 1995), however in further research a more comprehensive range of goals were identified including social responsibility goals (compliance with school and classroom rules and expectations), prosocial goals (willingness to help, share and cooperate), affiliation/relationship goals (desire to belong, to establish relationships), approval goals (to be liked by

others, to seek approval from teachers, peers, parents), welfare goals (to help others), and status goals (to be well regarded within the peer group and the class). There has however, been a lack of continuity in how these goals are defined by researchers. Three goals that have been more consistently agreed on are the goals of responsibility, intimacy or relationships, and status (L. H. Anderman, 1999a; Patrick, Anderman, & Ryan, 2002).

Responsibility goals

Significant research attention has been given to the impact of students' pursuit of social responsibility within school and classroom contexts. Social responsibility goals are represented by students' desire to meet formal social demands of classrooms (Wentzel, 1991b) by doing such things as following instructions and complying with classroom rules. The degree to which students endorse social responsibility goals is indicative of their desire and ability to meet the social requirements of classroom contexts and has been associated with mastery orientation, positive affect and academic outcomes, increased academic efficacy, and higher teacher allocated grades (L.H. Anderman, 1999b; L. H. Anderman & Anderman, 1999). Students pursuing responsibility goals are likely to attempt to earn approval, comply with teacher requests and show consideration for other students (L.H. Anderman, 1999b). The motivational components of pursuing social responsibility goals have been shown to influence the intensity with which students engage in academic activities (Wentzel, 1991b). Responsibility goals in general have been associated with positive schooling outcomes.

Relationship goals

Students pursuing relationship goals wish to establish and maintain positive peer relationships in the school context (L. H. Anderman, 1999a). Relationship goals refer to students' desire for intimacy with friends and to be accepted by other children at school. Students who do not desire peer relationships within the school environment may be more susceptible to experiencing negative affect in school through lack of social support, whereas those desiring peer relationships may experience positive affect in school through positive feelings emanating from companionship and peer validation (L.H. Anderman, 1999b). Even so, pursuit of social relationship goals above and beyond academic goals has been shown to have a negative impact on academic motivation, interest, engagement and learning if students' desire to make friends dominates their academic motivation (L. H. Anderman, 1999a).

Social status goals

Social status goals represent students' social motivation in relation to the wider peer group at school. In terms of motivation, social status goals represent students' desires to establish and maintain "social prestige through affiliation with the 'popular' group at school, but not necessarily a goal of being well liked" (L. H. Anderman, 1999a, p. 309). Status goals indicate a desire to receive positive judgments by the wider peer group and reflect an individual's acceptance of the informal social norms generated by the peer group. Students who do not pursue status goals may indeed hold different values to those promoted by the peer group (L.H. Anderman, 1999b). Pursuit of social status goals has been linked to performance approach goal orientation and with the perception that help seeking in the classroom is a negative

behaviour (L. H. Anderman & Anderman, 1999; A. M. Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997). Anderman and Anderman (1999) suggest the possibility that:

“students who are more focused on their social relationships and reputations among their peers are also more likely to look to their peer group for evidence of their own academic success and achievement ... the peer group is not only more salient for such individuals as a social network, but also as a comparison group against which to assess their own performance” (p. 33).

This comment suggests the possibility that status goals may be associated with relationship goals and could have an impact on pursuit of academic goals, such as performance. Thus the relationships between goals may be important in understanding academic and social goals.

Perhaps one of the key reasons responsibility, relationship and status goals have been investigated more thoroughly than others is because of the development of survey items to identify these goals. Other research methods, particularly those of a qualitative, inductive nature, have generated further social goals based on students' responses during semi-structured interviews. Using inductive methods, Dowson and McInerney (2003) found that students identified five social goals that were important to their school achievement, including affiliation (wanting to achieve academically to enhance a sense of belonging to a group, or groups, and/or to build or maintain interpersonal relationships) approval (wanting to achieve academically to gain the approval of teachers, peers and/or parents), responsibility (wanting to achieve academically out of a sense of responsibility to others, or to meet social role obligations, or to follow social and moral 'rules'), status (wanting to achieve academically to maintain/attain social position in school and/or later life) and concern (wanting to achieve academically to be able to assist others in their academic or personal development) (Dowson & McInerney, 2003, p. 100). These findings suggest that a range of social goals are relevant to the reasons students have for wanting to do well at school and highlight that social goals may have an impact on academic goals.

Social goals in an achievement goal theory framework

Although there has been significant research regarding students' social goals in achievement contexts, some authors argue that in general, social goals research such as that reported above has not used achievement goal theory in conceptualising social goals. Ryan, Kiefer and Hopkins (2004) propose that achievement goals in the social domain can be conceptualised as mastery, performance-approach and performance-avoidance. Within this conceptualisation a social mastery goal is concerned with developing positive and supportive relationships (it is important to me to work on improving the quality of my relationships with my friends), a social performance-approach goal is concerned with demonstrating social desirability and gaining positive judgements from others (it is important to me that others think of me as popular) and social performance-avoid is concerned with avoiding both being socially undesirable and negative judgements from others (my goal is to avoid doing things that would cause others to make fun of me). These authors argue that conceptualising achievement goals in the social domain can enable greater insights about the role of social goals in learning contexts to be made and may “advance understanding of individual's social achievement-related processes and adjustment” (p. 311). While there are advantages in this conceptualisation of social goals and survey measures have been developed to identify social goals in this manner (Horst,

Finney, & Barron, in press) there are also limitations in using deductive methods to gather data about students social reasons for wanting to achieve at school.

Multiple social and academic goals

Students endorse multiple social and academic goals in learning contexts (Ainley, 1993; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). While social goals are widely recognised as an important aspect of the classroom environment with the potential to influence academic goals little empirical research has shown relationships between social and academic achievement goals. The studies that have been conducted generally point to the positive impact of mastery goals on social goals such as responsibility and friendship and a strong association between performance goals and friendship and status goals (L. H. Anderman, 1999a; L. H. Anderman & Anderman, 1999).

As previously mentioned, Dowson and McInerney (2003) used interviews to enable students to articulate their goals and explain how and why these goals were endorsed. This research illustrated that multiple academic and social goals may interact in conflicting, converging, or compensating ways to influence students' academic motivation and performance in real school contexts. In an earlier study Dowson and McInerney (2001) argue that social goals "may actually be more salient and predictive of students' global motivation and achievement than either mastery and performance goals" (p. 40) and that mastery and performance goals may only be relevant when social goals are effectively being met. Levy-Tossman, Kaplan and Assor (2007) report associations between academic motivation and social relationships at school. Their study investigated the relationship between academic goals and friendship intimacy and found that mastery goals were positively related to trust, mutual sharing, and adaptive social problem solving between friends, however, performance approach goals were negatively related to intimacy friendship. More studies such as these are important if we are to identify and explain associations between academic and social goals. Investigating the relationships between goals is crucial for further development of our understandings about motivational goals in real learning contexts. As Anderman (1999a) argues, while research has developed understandings regarding the impact of social aspects of schooling on academic outcomes the "reciprocity of these domains has received little attention. Understanding how these domains interact remains a challenge for future research" (p. 305). Clearly, the issue of multiple academic and social goals in learning contexts is a highly significant area for further research.

Goals and group differences

In the last ten years researchers have begun to consider how the personal goals pursued by students might be influenced by factors such as age, gender and ethnicity. Research has begun to uncover some associations between these factors and motivation from a goal theory perspective, however, there are few strong connections established.

Most research concerning the motivation of adolescents has focused on early adolescents in elementary and middle schools. Anderman, Austin and Johnson (2002, cited in Horst, Finney, & Barron, in press) propose that while infants have an interest in everything, this interest narrows and becomes more specific in later childhood and adolescence. It may be that as children grow older their academic goals change to better accommodate particular contexts (classrooms and schools) and social needs. Some studies show that particular social goals are more salient to individuals during

specific stages of adolescence, for example Wentzel (1999a) found that behaving appropriately was more important than socialising with peers for middle school students, whereas high school students endorsed both having fun with friends and being responsible. Few researchers have considered the goal structures of later adolescents still attending secondary education. Smith and Sinclair (2005) suggest that as adolescents become older they may in fact be more focused on performance goals, or even adapt their goals to meet particular learning contexts such as final exams. The role that age plays in the goals pursued by students could be further investigated by studies using cross-sectional or longitudinal designs. For example designs that incorporate qualitative and quantitative methods such as that used by Lehtinen, Vauras, Salonen, Olkinoura, and Kinnunen (1995), in which students were interviewed and surveyed over a period of several years might serve as examples. The importance of longitudinal and cross-sectional studies lies in their ability to capture how motivational goals develop over time and across contexts, something which we currently know little about. Developmental studies that investigate the change (or lack of change) in individuals' goal profiles are needed in order to better understand this phenomenon.

Some researchers have suggested that performance goals may be more salient for boys (E. M. Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Smith & Sinclair, 2005). Using survey measures Dowson, McInerney and Nelson (2006) investigated the relationship between goal pursuit and school context. The findings show that males reported stronger academic and social goals when experiencing performance-oriented conditions, however, under the same conditions females report strong academic goals. Girls have been found to endorse social responsibility goals to a greater extent than boys in classrooms (Patrick, Anderman, & Ryan, 2002; A. M. Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997). Boys have been shown to endorse status goals more than girls (A. M. Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997). Although there are some associations highlighted by this research, generally speaking, gender has not provided overwhelmingly unique effects in the presence of social and motivational variables.

How motivational goals may be influenced by ethnicity and cultural beliefs is a key question for further research. Some researchers (Freeman, 2004; Freeman, Gutman, & Midgley, 2002) have reported specific research regarding goal theory and African American students. Other researchers have investigated the goals pursued by students from diverse cultural backgrounds and argue that traditional mastery and performance approaches to motivation may be less relevant for students whose cultural beliefs are entwined with group orientations (McInerney, Roche, McInerney, & Marsh, 1997). In Australia, research has not identified significant differences in academic goals pursued by indigenous and non-indigenous students, however, Aboriginal students have been found to be more influenced by social goals rather than academic goals (McInerney, Hinkley, Dowson, & Van Etten, 1998). As our society becomes increasingly mobile, and particularly in Australia where most suburban schools are comprised of students from a range of ethnic backgrounds, it is critical that motivation theory be able to account for both *what* goals students pursue and *why* these goals are important in order to develop theoretical explanations that reflect real life learning situations. To achieve this research needs to investigate academic and social goals from a range of cultural perspectives.

Methodological approaches to investigating goals

The vast majority of research investigating achievement goals of individuals in learning contexts has utilised quantitative approaches such as surveys to gather data about what goals students pursue and why these goals are particularly salient. Even though these approaches have generated a large body of research which has extended theoretical understandings, more recently authors are acknowledging the limitations of such approaches and seeking to complement quantitative methods with qualitative methods.

Most quantitative studies investigating the achievement goals students pursue in classrooms have used deductive rather than inductive methods, assuming particular goals are present and then measuring the degree to which they are endorsed. Although this approach has led to increased understandings about particular aspects of goal theory the inherent danger in this approach is that such studies may “misrepresent both the range of complexity of students’ motivational goals” (Dowson & McInerney, 2001, p. 35). As such, they may not take into account the full range of reasons that students want to achieve at school and are at risk of being research rather than participant driven. Are the goals described above in the literature accurate representations of students’ goals in real learning contexts?

Recently Urdan and Mestas (2006) used quantitative and qualitative methodology to explore the reasons students give for pursuit of performance goals. Through interviewing students they found there was a broad range of reasons for endorsement of performance goals, such as the “desire to feel or appear competent, concerns with building or maintaining social bonds with friends or family members, feelings of self-consciousness, and awareness of one’s standing in relation to others” (p. 361). The additional finding that students interpret survey items in different ways than intended also raises questions about the reliability of survey responses as accurate measures of goals and motivation.

Kaplan and Maehr (2007) also argue that there “may be a risk in over-reliance on survey methods in the development of a theory as seems to have been the case in goal orientation theory” (p. 149). Surveys naturally involve making assumptions that constructs mean the same thing to each individual and therefore may not accurately reflect the views of students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Kaplan and Maehr (2007) argue that goal orientation theory would

“benefit at this point from complementing survey methods and a cross-cultural approach to motivation in different cultural groups, with research that focuses on the socio-cultural meaning of actions in achievement settings within cultural as well as other types of groups” (p. 149).

Some studies have used qualitative methods to investigate student motivation in classrooms (Dowson & McInerney, 2003; Lemos, 1996; MacCallum, 1997; Mansfield, 2002) and in doing so draw attention to the complex nature of motivation in authentic contexts. Qualitative studies are generally limited in their focus on a small number of cases, however, the richness of the data can uncover associations and nuances that are difficult to detect in wider ranging quantitative studies. Qualitative studies are valuable in that they often enable participants to “describe their achievement goal pursuits using their own words” (Urdan & Mestas, 2006, p. 346). Using qualitative research is imperative to investigate the layers underneath participants’ statements about what they do, and delve further into *why* and *how* this is so.

Directions for future research

Given the wealth of research regarding motivational goals conducted over the last 20 years a great deal is known about the types of goals students may pursue in learning contexts and how these goals may influence cognitive, affective and behavioural outcomes. Even so, there are still questions that beg further investigation.

Certainly a clear picture of the cognitive, affective and behavioural impact of some prevalent goals has been developed. Even so, there may be limitations in our understandings of these goals due to a reliance on deductive rather than inductive measures. To further probe into the reasons students pursue particular goals, methodologies that include qualitative measures are needed to ‘unpack’ the reasons behind pursuit of particular goals.

The issue of how students manage multiple goals and which combinations of goals might be most suitable for adaptive learning is still unclear. How students pursue multiple goals across social and academic domains is an important direction for future research (A. M. Ryan, Kiefer, & Hopkins, 2004). Presently research providing empirical evidence that goals interact to influence achievement processes and outcomes in the academic domain is inconsistent (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002). More research is needed to attend to the diversity of goals that influence achievement, how such goals are prioritised and orchestrated by individuals and groups, and the relationships between these goals and patterns for educational outcomes (Roeser, 2004). In sum, there is a call from researchers for greater understanding to be developed about multiple goals in learning contexts.

Further research would also benefit from serious consideration of how social goals might influence academic beliefs and behaviours. Some researchers have hinted at the possibility of social goals facilitating other goals and should this be the case, what relationships exist between these two goals? What social goals may encourage adaptive academic goals and vice versa? Indeed, further investigation of social goals might provide additional insights into motivation for and engagement in learning (A. M. Ryan, Kiefer, & Hopkins, 2004).

Whether or not goals change over time also warrants further investigation through cross-sectional or longitudinal studies. Currently there is little understanding about whether goals are stable or whether they change due to factors such as context or emotional and cognitive development (which may be particularly salient during adolescence). The value of longitudinal and cross-sectional studies lies in their ability to capture how motivational goals develop over time and across contexts, a question for which we presently have few answers.

Finally, while goal theory has approached motivation primarily from a socio-cognitive perspective, individuals’ goals in real learning contexts are embedded in multiple sociocultural contexts, for example, immediate classrooms, broader school psychological environments, peer groups, families and cultural groups (Friedel, Cortina, Turner, & Midgley, in press). These multiple contexts have a significant impact on individuals’ motivation in classrooms and schools and frameworks for fully understanding this process are needed. Kaplan and Maehr (2007) suggest that for goal theory to thrive theorists should pay heed to understandings and methods of new perspectives.

Conclusion

The prevalence of goal theory in the study of motivation in the last 20 years has yielded extensive research focusing on the goals individuals pursue in learning contexts and the cognitive, affective and behavioural impact of such goals. Even so, much of this research relies on quantitative, deductive methods and so may be limiting our understandings. Studies using quantitative and qualitative, inductive approaches will be critical to develop deeper understandings about what goals are important to students and why they pursue particular goals. A multiple goal perspective is also vital as multiple goals are true to real learning contexts. Finally, cross sectional and longitudinal studies showing how goals develop over time will have important theoretical implications, as well as practical implications for educators who wish to create learning environments that are motivationally appropriate for particular age groups. Studying motivation in classrooms is extremely complex, so establishing methods and ways to account for this complexity is essential to extend current understandings.

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